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Womanhood Initiation

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Abstract

Womanhood Initiation is a poem I wrote during Maria Gillan's Advanced Poetry Workshop. Professor Gillan is a Professor of English at Binghamton University, and her workshop is unique in that it takes place during three long weekend sessions throughout the semester. This specific poem was inspired by one of Professor Gillan's writing prompts: "I do not feel like a man/woman yet." I tend to explore gender in my poetry, specifically girlhood and womanhood. Young women and girls, often put down in United States culture for their vanity and selfishness, are complex, intelligent people and have more to say that should be valued. In this poem, I explore feelings of discomfort in the transition from girlhood to womanhood. Experiences like menstruation and using makeup are supposed to signify womanhood, yet the girls and women I know still express uncertainty in their legitimacy as women. In this poem, I reach the conclusion that this confusion is part of being a woman, and our clumsy initiations into womanhood are ongoing.

I do not feel like a woman yet.
When I sit in front of my mirror in the morning,
lining my lips with red or plum or pink,
tracing my eyebrows with dark brown pencil,
I run my hands over the treasures in my drawers.
I have a chest of my own, now.

I used to relish the nights of my childhood dance recitals
because it meant I could wear my mother's makeup.
She would dust my cheeks with blush
and pull my hair back into a tight bun,
poking the back of my head with too many bobby pins.
I loved to sift through her drawers,
loved the cakey smell of lipstick.

And even with my own collection
of shiny tubes and compacts,
I trace my fingers over the bumps on my skin,
feeling like the awkward seventh grader
who wore too much eyeliner.
The pretty veil I draw onto my face
feels like an illusion some days.

Here I am, parading as a woman.
Here, if you take a tissue to my face,
it will all wash away.
You will see the girl underneath
with acne scars,
who rehearses what to say on the phone,
who can't walk in heels,
who pictures people she knows

talking about her after she leaves the room.

I always thought being a woman meant
carrying lipstick in your purse
and having a boyfriend
and talking about sex with your friends.
I have done all of these things
and still feel gawky and childish.

We can't seem to decide when womanhood begins.
People say after your period starts,
you become a woman.
But no twelve year old I knew,
including myself, felt any more womanly
after bleeding through her underwear.
If anything, we felt even more awkward,
put away another secret we had to keep.
We learned how to tuck tampons away
in our sleeves so no one would see.
The pink-tiled bathroom stalls became
headquarters for insecurity.

My mother told me recently
that while she was ordering food at a restaurant,
she pulled out her wallet,
and a pad fell out of her purse.
She said she was embarrassed
and tried to laugh it off.
I picture her in middle-school clumsiness,
cutting her own bangs in the bathroom mirror,
and she still does this.
She taught me how to shave my legs,
bought me my first set of makeup,
held me as I cried after breaking up
with my high school boyfriend.

Surely, she is a woman.
Surely, this is not an illusion.
Maybe being a woman feels like
bathroom stall secrets
and smudged makeup
and teeth clinking together
during a first kiss.
I thought there would be some moment,
some initiation or ceremony.
But there is much less fanfare than that.

I remember passing notes with friends in middle school
and dotting our “I’s” with hearts.
Sometimes, I think being a woman is like that.
Scrawling your secrets and thoughts on lined paper,
folding them intricately,
and sharing them,
no matter how scary that may be.